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1821 Rome April 10th 1821

My dear Father

I know you like to see how matters are going on in my Picture so now I will describe every part to you — you shall see it in your mind's eye — Come sit down and make yourself at home whilst I detail to you my picture's history — painting and purpose — The history is this — After Athens had been taken by the Spartans and the Athenians reduced to every misery that slavery and tyranny could subject them — they began to determine on redeeming their Liberty — to this purpose they fixed their hopes on Alcibiades a great General and countryman — he had extended their conquests and magnified them to the greatest height — but he had overdone it — yet still he was the only one they could look too — Their enemies seeing this and fearing the courage of Alcibiades — determined on taking away his life — At this time he was living at his Villa — to which they sent a number of Assassins who were afraid to enter it — to take him by hand — but as their object was to take him by any means — dead or alive they set fire to his house — Alcibiades after endeavouring in vain to extinguish the flames rushed through them sword in hand — the barbarians not daring to wait his approach — fled before him — but at the same time discharged at him a shower of darts — which killed him on the spot — I think you will see this is a very fine subject for a picture to present to the Royal Academy of London — it has never been painted and yet every one knows the story — Now I will describe to you my picture — On the left hand is the house on fire from the door of which Alcibiades is rushing like a whirlwind — naked — with his right hand grasping the sword to strike down the first in his way — his face full of fury and pain for his

courtezan wrongs - the fire blazing behind him - and the smoke rising
out with him - The Assassins are seven in number - they fly before
him - the first is covering his neck and face from the sight of
Alcibiades's sword - the second is starting away with two blazing
torches in his hands his face full of horror - the next three are
running behind some trees - where one draws his bow - another
has just shot his arrow - which has missed Alcibiades and struck
in the door of the house - his face is full of malicious disappoint-
ment at not hitting his mark - and he is running away - a
third behind the trees stands his ground and is throwing a dart
these three are all in shadow from the trees which shield
them from the cause of their fear - their are two others drawing
their bows at a distance - Alcibiades is said to have been
very handsome and noble in his appearance - then the beautiful
house - and the laurel and palm trees before it - make for
my picture very dazzling - It is now about half finished and - I
I hope in three Months it will be in England. —— O! how happy
I am I came here - every thing I do I am successful in - my Miniatures
are very much sought after - I have painted five and got 40 Guineas
for them - one was a sleeping job - There are about 500 English here
here now - and I can have any number to paint - but this is not all
the attention I receive from the English Nobility here is most
encouraging - we are hand in hand - walking in the same places
living in the same houses - three days ago I had the honor of
dining in company with Lord Colchester - the Duke of Hamilton
Lord Rivers and 3 other superiors - this is looked on as a most
fortunate hit for me - it was by mere chance - they came into
my study by mistake and were so much pleased with my pictures

I was invited to dine with them — I how delighted you would have been to see how I was looked up to — to hear them encourage me to go on as I had begun — for Historical Painting is scarce known to the English painters here — they have no Harmony in the Art — no imagination — If I like I may be a Lord in Painting here compared with the others — but poor fellows they are really nothing — already they look with surprise on my pictures — and introduce me as the Representative of English Painting — as the Painters that have been here have been Portrait Painters or Landscape — now the French and Italians are very great in History — and the English here I look to come up with them — This is a glorious place for a young painter — every thing at hand — every thing I can paint — Thank God I am every way successful — have obtained four Heats a first victory — in the room — which I did every thing was ordered to be burned — the Landlord here was so afraid of catching the English fever — the rooms have been entirely made new — window — door — walls — ceiling — floors all new — all this I have paid for — the wretches were cheating me — the Landlord had done the rooms in the most extravagant way thinking that I must pay for it all — but now I have been protected by a Roman who has made them take just one sixth their Demand — I have beat them at every point — but I am an Englishman — and here an Englishman is a God — You would be overjoyed to see how nobly I get on — every one tries to serve me — I have received so many presents — and have such respect shown me — that I would not be other than my own Son Joe — to be a Prince of Rome — so you have been alarmed about the armies advancing — were you right to be — for never was such warlike preparations — such behaviour in a Mob — such instruments — but I suppose you know it has all gone off without a fight — the Neapolitans are quite forgotten — it is all over — we are just the same here

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If the Academy elect me here or not I shall be able to do much better than was I crowned in England — it is a fine thing for me to have the gold Medal here — I am the first for 20 years — this is the reason of my success — the name of a Gold Medal is like Magic every where — I have an invitation out to dinner every day — but I have only been twice — for I come here to study — not to go out to dinner — In 3 Months the Examination will decide — for — my picture seems more of my hand in the Design —

FEB 28 1821

Thomas Sully Esq.
Philadelphia
United States
America

Pray Excuse Haste

The below Sketches are such as I intend to paint — such thoughts occur — If you wish say — "why did I not finish my Fairy picture" this is my reason — it was more than I could do in the time — and what I am now doing is completely Academical — quite to the purpose — I shall finish my Fairies in the Autumn — in the Summer I shall go to Florence — after which I come back here for the winter — Farewell my dear Father — you shall never be disappointed about me — I must impose — and have — Farewell — I shall some time send you a Landscape for your Garden

Joseph Severn